

13



High and Low Castes in Karani

Viramma, with Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine

*Editors' note: Viramma is a member of the "untouchable" Pariah caste, working as a midwife and agricultural laborer in the small Tamil village of Karani near Pondicherry. Like the rest of her family, Viramma is bonded to Karani's richest landowner, the "Grand Reddiar." Viramma: Life of an Untouchable records Viramma's life story as told to Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine over a period of ten years. She describes her brief, happy childhood; the ordeal of marriage as a young girl and her subsequent fulfilling relationship with her husband; her experiences as a mother of twelve children, nine of whom died; and her days of hard work under the burning sun. She tells of the mutual support the untouchable castes provide each other in their *ceri*—the low-caste residential quarters separated from the main village (*ur*) of the higher castes—as they lend each other rice, sing together, and share confidences. She witnesses as well the growing politicization of caste in her community, as various political party members come to encourage the local low castes to fight the caste system and call themselves "Harijan" (people of God) and, subsequently, "Dalit" instead of "Untouchable." (Indeed, in India, the title of her narrative has been rendered—perhaps more appropriately—as *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*.) In this selection, Viramma tells of the various castes making up her village of Karani. Being "high" or "low" is tied here to owning land versus working on others' land; giving cooked food to others versus being regarded as so low or impure that one may only receive it; and possessing money versus having none. One can see in her narrative that it is possible to be "low" in terms of caste purity, and at the same time be "high" in terms of possessing wealth and power. Viramma's wit, strength, and sense of pleasure in life also come through in her story, even as she describes many of the hard inequities she has faced.*

All my family is employed at the Grand Reddiar's. My husband takes care of the pumps. The Reddiar owns two which irrigate every day. I collect the cow dung and clean the stable. My daughter Miniyamma helped me until she got married. Sundari has done the same and now it's my daughter-in-law Amsa who works at the Reddiar's. Anban started by looking after the cows. Now he does the important cultivation work with my husband. The reason is that we don't own any land. God only left us these eyes and these hands to earn our living. By working hard at the Reddiar's we've been able to lead our lives in the proper way. We've been able to give Miniyamma and Sundari away in marriage with silver ankle chains and some clothes. We've paid our share of funeral expenses when we've had to. I've been able to buy these jewels for my ears. And when we married Anban, the Reddiar gave Amsa her gold *tali* [marriage necklace] and her sari. Thanks to the Reddiar, thanks to his fortune—and it's a great one, especially in land—we have enough to eat without worrying. The Reddiar is an important man. Every day or nearly every day he goes to Pondy. The serfs who work at the Reddiar's have their rice guaranteed!

Of all the castes in the *ur* [village], the Reddiar caste is the highest. They have no equals. The others come after them: the Mudaliar, the Naicker, the Gounder. The Reddiar are the people who don't go to work, they put others to work: fifty, sixty, ninety, two hundred people. Their women don't work and they never go out.

I take twenty Paratchi [women Dalit laborers] to plant out the Grand Reddi's paddy fields, and they are paid by the day; it takes four Paratchi to plant out four hundred square yards. When we work for the Reddiar, there's no question of us singing. We keep our mouths shut out of respect for the Reddiar, because they're always there in the field watching over us, sitting on their cord bed under a coconut grove or even closer, on the dike under the shade of an umbrella. Their serf—for the Grand Reddi, that's me—directs the work and checks to see that everything is going right, 'Hey, plant out here! Hey, Saroja! That corner over there's not done!' But towards midday, as soon as the Reddiar goes home to eat, I start up with the first song. After our husbands, the Reddiar are the people we respect and fear the most. We are their serfs. It's different with other landowners, we sing as much as we want and anyway, they like it. Sometimes when we work for the Naicker, we joke with him. We can even make fun of him. We shout, 'Yennayya! You never stop giving your wife children! She's pregnant every year like a bitch and you'll lose your strength, you won't have anything left, even if you eat melted butter and curds. Come over here a bit, ayya, come and see if your strength is a match for us beef eaters when it comes to real work like this!' It makes him laugh to hear us going on like that! That's how we joke with him, Sinnamma, and with the other landowners for whom we're not serfs. The Naicker own lots of land. They've got some rented out, and pumps and stables full of animals: cows and goats, and they make plenty of milk.

We make fun of Brahmins as well, Sinnamma. When the *pappan* [Brahman priest] is about to walk past on the dike, we quickly make up a little song about him like this:

It's the *pappan*, *adi-pappan* [top Brahman]
 Who irrigates by digging a hole,
 Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,
 Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,
 While drinking the juices of a young girl
 That very night, there was no moon
 And his sleep was troubled,
 That man with the *pottu*¹ in the shape of the moon,
 Wants to welcome Virayi so much!!
 Nanna, nanna, nanana,
 Nanna, nannana, nananana . . .

The bile wells up in his mouth when he hears that. It disgusts him, he spits on the ground, wipes his lips and hurries on. Have you seen Brahmins eat crab? Even just hearing about it makes them want to throw up! Brahmins own nothing or almost nothing apart from the temple land. We never go and work for them, they only employ Kudiyanar. That's why we can make fun of them. The *pappan* are the Reddiar's priests for marriages, the *puja* [worship] of the ancestors, for this or that rite and for the funeral ceremonies on the sixteenth day as well. They are lower than the Reddiar and like the other servants, they get uncooked food from them. They take it raw because they're in contact with God and they must be pure: they have the food cooked at their homes. We prefer to get it cooked: it saves us the time and cost of cooking. One day at the Reddiar's, I heard the Brahmin mumbling his prayers as he raised the sacrificial fire. (*Laughs.*) I was looking through the window when the Grand Reddiar's mother saw me and chased me away: 'Eh, Velpakkatta! Get out of here! Get out of here! Don't look at that!' And it's true that we mustn't see any of it. The Reddiar and the Brahmins speak both languages, Tamil and Telugu. They are vegetarians, they eat lots of melted butter, yoghurt and fruit, and they drink milk. In the country there are no other castes that can match them.

But Karani has definitely got castes! Reddiar, Mudaliar, Gounder, Udaiyar, Tulukkan, Vaniyan, Ambattan, Komutti, Vannan. In the *ceri* [low-caste residential quarter] there are Koravan, Sakkili, Vannan as well, *talaiyari* [assistant to the village accountant]. There are Tomban towards Selvipatti and Pakkanur. No one accepts them into the castes.² They're pig rearers. They live with their animals. The Tomban is very low, but I've already told you, Sinnamma, he's become very rich. His pigs breed fast, he feeds them on abandoned ground, it costs him nothing and he earns plenty of money selling them. One year we had a big argument when I had rented a plot of land near the temple of Aiyandar from the Reddiar and I'd sowed it with *ragi*

[grain]. One afternoon I was at my door oiling my hair when Sinnappayya ran up to tell me, 'Aunt! Aunt! Tomban's pigs are wrecking your *ragi* field! Come and see, quickly! Quickly!' I put up my hair, tying it up on one side, and followed Sinnappayya who ran ahead. The kids who used to graze the cows over there had discovered the pigs and sent Sinnappayya to tell me. 'You know, aunt, when the Tomban kids saw there was nobody in the field, they brought their pigs right up to it and went swimming in the river. When we were going past with the cows and saw the pigs in the field, we let you know straightaway, aunt!' I was boiling with rage. I told the kids to catch the pigs, but those dirty beasts, they're smart! They made us run all over the place and they kept on getting away. The Tomban kids saw what was going on from a distance and quickly got out of the water to round up their pigs but even so Sinnappayya managed to capture a piglet which we tied to a stake. Then the Grand Tomban arrived and beat his little pig-keepers. I said to him, 'Innappa! Your pigs got into my field. They've ruined part of my crop. What are you going to do?'

'Please don't get angry,' he answered, 'I didn't know what was happening. We didn't let them loose in your field on purpose. I'll be very careful next time!'

'Ah! That's what you think! You think we're going to let it drop. A crop ruined, a crop filled with such beautiful ears! I want compensation. I'm going to appeal to the Reddiar: he'll decide for himself!'

That's how I answered the Tomban and Sinnappayya ran to tell the Reddiar but he was having a rest. Sinnappayya waited for the Reddiar to get up and told him the story and he told him he'd come after he'd drunk his milk. Meanwhile we'd left the piglet tied up and gone into the shade. I had enough time to make myself a chew of betel. When I heard the Reddiar arriving on his motorbike, I got up and spat out my betel. I went towards him and said, 'Innanga! I've had my grain ruined! How do you expect us to pay you rent now? What do you think of that?'

The Reddiar turned to the Tomban and said, 'Innappa! What do you have to say to that? I see only two answers: either you let her have the piglet or you compensate her in money for her losses.'

The Tomban, squeezing together his legs and hugging his chest with both arms, begged the Reddiar, 'It's my fault but what's to be done? I didn't do it on purpose. I can only give ten rupees. Next time I'll make sure the kids don't bring my pigs this way, Sami!'

But I didn't want to hear any of it and I argued, 'How do you expect me to pay you the rent, Sami? How could I give you five sacks of *ragi* after this damage? I want thirty rupees in compensation!'

The Reddiar calmed both of us down by suggesting twenty-five rupees. Then the Tomban said, 'Have that pig untied and give it to the woman who cultivates your field. I cannot pay that amount!'

And that's how I came home with a piglet. I gave half a rupee to Sinnappayya and ten *paice* to each kid. They went and bought doughnuts at Kannimma's. As for me, I raised the piglet, and he grew big and fat very fast. My husband and Selvam the cobbler killed it, quartered it and sold it at Tirulagam market. We got twenty-five rupees—the same as Tomban's fine—and on top of that we treated ourselves to a pork curry—and Selvam too: of course we gave him a helping. Because we like pork very much, Sinnamma! Sometimes we club together to buy one on the days of festivals, for Dipavali, Pongal or for the festival of Kartikai, and we share it.³ There's a little song about it:

The one who's bred the pig is the Raja Pandya
The one who's made the most of it is the Chetti-who-burps . . .

It's pork eaters who know how tasty it is and not the people who breed them on their land. Anyway the Tomban have got rich. They're farmers now: they grow rice, sugar cane, aubergines, chillis and they all get me to hire the manual labour. But in the end, even if they're rich, they're still very low. The Kudiyanar agree to work for them but they don't get any cooked food. Although all that's changing in this *kaliyugam* [Kali Yuga, the degenerate age]. Now you see Tomban living in the *ur*. They used to be only just a little bit above us and now they're much higher thanks to their money! Or rather, we've stayed poor and we find ourselves even lower than before, still accepting cooked food from the Tomban.⁴

In this *kaliyugam*, money's the master and when you know how to earn it, you make yourself higher than you were the day before. It's the same in the city—everywhere it's a question of money. Look at the Kudiyanar. In the past they only worked at the Reddiar's. They did housework, they cooked the gruel for the serfs and the agricultural workers, they did the washing up, they helped in the kitchen. Always at the Reddiar's. Nowadays they'll do hard work in the fields like us, at our side, and they'll even do it for the Tomban. Because you have to fill your stomach and so you'll work for anybody as long as he pays! But one of these Kudiyanar families moved to Madras and a girl from our caste has been doing their housework for a while. It's a different world far away from the village where you were born, especially in the city.

Just as there are the rich high castes, so there are the poor low castes. God gave the land to the rich high castes and he gave the poor low castes the duty of cultivating the land. The duty of the rich high castes is to employ us, us the Palli, the Pariahs, the Kudiyanar. But there are some Kudiyanar who own land, sometimes as much as twelve acres: they don't go and work. Other low castes have their particular trade. They are a little higher than us because they don't eat beef. They eat eggs, vegetables, fish, poultry, they drink milk

like you. But meat is unclean, it's waste. Milk is pure. And as we eat waste, we're unclean. That's the difference between low castes and high castes.

There are all sorts of low castes in Karani that are higher than us. There are three families of barbers, brothers, who moved in next to the temple of Perumal. They're barbers for the Reddiar and the Gounder. They cut their hair, shave their armpits, cut their nails, massage them with oil. Generally they work on the steps of the lotus pond and for our Reddiar they move to his house and do their work on the *tinnai* [verandah]. These families work as barbers for the people of the *ur*, but the Sanar and the hunters sometimes go and borrow their scissors or razors secretly. We do that as well when our barber is away. We quietly borrow a razor from a barber in the *ur* and we quietly give it back to him, because if people ever knew that the same razor had shaved a Pariah and a Reddiar—ayoyo! there would be one of those arguments! That's impossible! But all the same, a barber agrees to it for some money or a little bit of grain. Those barbers are the temple musicians as well and they get some grain for that during the year. They play at puberty ceremonies, engagements and marriages; only auspicious celebrations. It all gives them extra income. Each of them plays a different instrument: the eldest plays the *ottu* [oboe], the youngest the *nadesvaram* [large wind instrument], and the youngest child the drum, dum, dum, dum, dum . . .

Two families of potters live opposite the barbers. They're not high or low, because everybody needs them, from the Reddiar to us. In the past the potter used to make enormous jars which contained thirty or forty measures of *kanji* [gruel]. If you knew how long it took to move those! If anyone carried them on their heads out to the fields, that made the shit come out of their hole! Nowadays the *kanji*'s put in a big aluminium pot which is fixed to a pole. Two men on each side carry it and it's much easier. The potter makes much less crockery than in the past; he mainly makes jars, tea sets for celebrations and dolls. I had all the crockery for my children's marriages made by him. The jars for Anban's marriage were very prettily decorated! I paid the potter in cereals: he's higher than us, but he accepts our grain.

The joiners have built their houses behind him. They are lower than the Gounder and they only marry amongst themselves. Next door there are the carpenters as well. Who else is there? If you come out of their houses and go straight ahead, two blacksmiths have moved in near the Reddiar's quarter. They're never short of orders and they work for us as well. Before the harvest they're asked for thirty to forty sickles. They sharpen old blades and repair carts. One also forged the trident under the banyan tree and the one in our house: you saw how well I decorated it! I never forget to perform the *puja* to that trident, to light some camphor for it. When a house is built in the *ur*, the blacksmiths are asked to make bars for the windows, hinges and bolts for the doors, pulleys for the well, all that sort of thing. The blacksmiths aren't low caste, they're free to go into the Gounder's and Reddiar's houses. They even get to eat with the Grand Reddiar, I've seen them there for a wedding.

One of their sons is in teaching now. He married a girl from Pondy where he works and he lives there.

Opposite the blacksmiths are the goldsmiths. There were two families in the past, the big and the small goldsmith. The first made *tali* for the Reddiar and the Gounder. The small one made them for other castes, including us. But he wasn't very honest, that one. I could see that for myself when I gave him an earring to mend. He gave it back much shinier but it was very light. Danam took him her *tali* and she got it back much lighter as well! But we didn't dare complain. They say he cheated a lot of people in Karani and stole a little bit of gold dust from each of them. He got rich that way and chose to leave the village to flaunt his wealth somewhere else. Apparently he set up in his wife's village but sister Virayi who comes from there never saw him again. No one knows what country he's in, that thief! The big goldsmith stayed. Since he had more work than before, he went and got a little shop on the main street of Tirulagam: now he employs three people. Goldsmiths are lower than the Reddiar but, like blacksmiths, they can go into their houses and eat there.

Near the pond, at the entrance to the *ur*, there are two families of traders, they're Komutti. That caste has no other trade apart from business, you can see them in any town. The Komutti speak Telugu, like the cobblers and the Reddiar. But they don't mix either with the Reddiar or with us. We never go to their houses and we don't get food from them. When they celebrate a marriage, they only give betel to the cobblers and even then it's behind their house. They get married discreetly, without making a big noise. Unlike all the other castes, they marry in the month of Adi. I like them a lot, because their wives are always very friendly when they talk to us.

I'd forgotten that the launderers are one of the low castes in the *ur*! They live in four or five houses next to each other and they own a donkey. We have launderers in the *ceri* as well. They're lower than us and we take turns giving them the evening meal. They are pretty poor, but they still manage to hold their yearly festival. They worship Mayilaru and their god resides in their laundering oven. On the day of the festival of Mayilaru, the one in the family who carries out the *puja* takes a bath, puts on new clothes, changes the oven and lights camphor in front of the stone for beating linen. The families cook four jars of *pongal* [a special rice dish] with rice flour and coconut. Some slit the throat of a chicken or—less often—bleed a pig. There's never any shortage of betel, bananas and flowers. Everything is handed out between them. We don't get anything, even though we contribute to their festival, just as the Reddiar contributes to our own festival of Periyandavan. It's the same, anyway: the launderers work for us and we have to give them something for their festival. No one can refuse. When Arayi, the launderer's wife, arrives with her basket to collect what she's owed—a measure of grain or a cup of oil—we give it to her but we don't miss the chance to have a moan, 'Those people, they're always ready to worship Mayilaru but they

haven't even brought our clothes back yet! They're nothing like the launderers in the *ur*: now *they* work!' Then Arayi goes into a corner, scratches her head and always comes up with a reason: it's rained and the linen hasn't dried: or it hasn't rained and there's not enough water in the river: or any old thing. We don't get a share of their offerings but sometimes our kids do. They always want to know what's going on and if they're there when the *puja*'s performed, the launderers give them a little *pongal*. As it's sweet and tastes good, the little ones eat it without thinking or realising that the launderers are lower than us. Don't forget that the launderers of the *ur* are higher than us as well as lower than the Gounder. I always speak with respect to the launderers of the *ur*.

The Sanar are also people of low rank. They're only just above us. A Sanar ought to act pretty much the same as us when the Reddiar goes by: he should stand up and speak to him humbly. Sanar and Pariahs talk to each other almost like equals in the fields. We call out to each other and say, 'Hey, big sister Kuppu! Ho, big brother Kannan! Uncle Viran!' You know my friend Vanaroja well, the palm juice seller. We love each other. Every day in the summer she goes through the *ceri* shouting, 'Palm juice! Palm juice!' She gives me a glass of it and in return I leave her a measure of paddy each year. Sometimes if the harvest looks like being scarce and I think our share is going to be small, I pinch one or two measures of paddy which I go and drop off at her house. Vanaroja keeps them well hidden for me and gives them back to me the next day without anybody seeing. To thank her I leave her a little share. We get on well, the two of us, even if our castes are different!

There's also the Sakkili, the cobblers. They're much lower than us. You know Selvam, the horn player: he gets cooked food from us. When there's a marriage, we give him a measure of rice and a rupee. His duty is to play the horn for us every time it's needed. We never go and drink or eat at his house, but we talk together normally, and we're warm to each other when we meet. He also often comes and sits on our *tinnai* to talk and joke (but never in a crude way) or simply to chew. Then he asks us, 'Give me some betel, aunt' or 'uncle' or 'big sister'—that's how he talks to us. That reminds me, Sinamma, I'm going to stop for a bit. I want to chew some betel as well. Hey! Look: your little Rajini has two spirals on her head. That means she'll have two husbands! (*Laughs.*)

NOTES

1. A *pottu* is the mark many Hindus wear on their foreheads.

2. Viramma's list is not exhaustive and needs a certain amount of explanation. Of the castes in the *ur*, the Udaiyar are farmers and landowners like the Reddiar and Gounder, the Reddiar being the most powerful caste of landowners and the Gounder the largest. There are no Mudaliar in Karani in the main sense of a high caste of landowners, but the Kepmarithe caste of thieves give themselves this title.

Tulukkan is a general name for Muslims and Viramma is probably thinking either of the civil servants sometimes appointed to the village or the tradesmen from Tirulagam. Viramma leaves out the main caste in the *ceri*—the Paraiyar, with their two sub-castes, the Vettiyan and the Pannaiyar—and she describes them in the next chapter. The Vannan here are the launderers of the *ceri* and the Sakkiliar the very low caste of cobblers. There are no Koravar—members of the Nari Korava tribe in the *ceri* as such, but some pass through and the Sakkiliar are often treated as being like them. *Talaiyari* is more a profession than a caste—the position of assistant to the village accountant—and the Tomban are misleadingly described as being completely outside the caste system. Their low rank confines them to the outskirts of the *ur*, and Viramma's exaggeration could be due to her argument with a particular Tomban which she goes on to describe.

3. Kartikai, the eighth month of the Tamil calendar (mid-November to mid-December), is when the festival of Kartikai dipam is celebrated. Lamps are lit in every house to evoke the ceremony to Siva at Tiruvannamalai on the same night.

4. The rules governing the exchange of food are an essential aspect of the caste system. The orthodox view is that cooked food can only be accepted from someone of an equal or higher caste. So, although the Kudiyannar are economically dependent on the Tomban, they assert their caste superiority by refusing cooked food. Raw food and basic foodstuffs, like grain, are exchanged more freely—as Viramma goes on to say, the potter accepts grain from her.